



If Your Screen Time Report Makes You Cringe Every Week, Here's How To Do a Digital Detox

A digital detox (or digital detox light) can help you recognize your habits with technology and break them for better mental and physical well-being.

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In: being present in the moment, opening my eyes and looking around, having uninterrupted conversations with those I meet. **Out:** My smartphone. About three days into my digital detox, I finally felt like I wasn't forgetting something. Around the same time, I noticed bad habits I'd formed with technology at my fingertips began to dissolve. I didn't have the gut instinct to reach for my phone first thing in the morning—to sit and scroll during meals, to indulge in FOMO.

Some context: After months of back-to-back work travel, I made the decision to take one more trip that would be different from the others. The premise: I'd spend six days at BodyHoliday, a resort in St. Lucia that offers guests an all-inclusive experience focused on getting away from the noise through regular workouts, excursions, and daily treatments.

Candidly, I'll be the first one to admit that I didn't entirely realize what I was getting into. Within minutes after checking in at the front desk, I quickly realized that there wasn't WiFi across the resort. Not expecting to completely log off for the week, I momentarily panicked. After realizing that there were, in fact, internet zones on the property, I decided that for me, at least, it didn't matter. I was going to spend the next six days doing a complete digital detox for no other reason than—it was about damn time.

What I Learned During a Week Offline

Like many other thirty-something entrepreneurs, my screentime report isn't exactly something I'm proud of. At six-plus hours per day, I shudder every Sunday at 9 a.m. when I'm reminded just how online I truly am. I'm certainly not alone, though. According to the market research group Nielsen, most adults spend over 11 hours per day interacting with media, albeit often in short spurts—five minutes here, 15 minutes there—rather than all at once.

So when I got those six hours back, it was a gift. You know how, at the start of the pandemic, everyone realized that they had chunks of time back in their day as they no longer had to commute to an office? Take that number, triple it, and that's how much time I'd been granted.

Not only did I try new activities, like jiu jitsu and Heatwise yin yoga, but I also read two books cover to cover, journaled more than ever before in a week's time, walked through gardens, and took a wine-tasting class. I was finding the connection that I often long for behind a screen IRL.

I realized I didn't need the safety net of my phone as much as I thought I did. Instead of dreading the abundance of free time or worrying about being bored, I chose to reframe the circumstances around it. Even in the moments, I felt bored or disconnected, it was an opportunity to try new things, so I made the conscious choice to see these low moments as an adventure.

Why Do a Digital Detox

Plain and simple: Spending excessive time glued to a screen can deeply impact physical and mental health, according to heaps of research. In today's landscape, it's hard to carry out nearly any task, from getting to the right restaurant for dinner to tackling a run without relying on some form of technology.

"We're surrounded by smartphones, laptops, smartwatches, and a constant barrage of notifications, immersing us completely in the digital world," says osteopath Maite Eaynal, an expert I met on-site at Body Holiday. "While technology has undoubtedly enhanced our daily lives, it also carries significant implications for our well-being."

Sure, you may think "technology is a help, not a hindrance," and you may not be entirely wrong. In fact, Jessica Lipschitz, PhD, Associate Director of Brigham and Women's Hospital Digital Behavioral Health and Informatics Research Program, says that not everyone may necessarily need a detox. "For some, they may believe that it's a positive tool, a way to connect with people," she says. "For others, it could be something used to procrastinate and judge yourself or others."

Dr. Lipschitz encourages individuals to ask themselves an important question: Do you feel happier after using social media or unhappier either because of the content or because of that time lost? Once you've answered this question, you can start to form a plan to address your smartphone usage.

How a Digital Detox Can Benefit You

Aside from getting in touch with your feelings, there are other benefits to going cold turkey with social media and technology.

1. Balancing dopamine levels

Engaging in activities like binge-watching Netflix or endlessly scrolling through social media triggers our nervous system's reward center, releasing dopamine—a key neurotransmitter for pleasure and motivation. However, this continuous stimulation can desensitize our brains over time, resulting in a persistent need for increased stimuli to achieve the same satisfaction levels. "This cycle can become addictive and contribute to feelings of lethargy," says Eaynal. "Digital detoxes offer the brain a chance to recalibrate closer to its natural baseline, helping alleviate these effects."

2. Decreasing stress and anxiety levels

The constant accessibility through emails, calls, and text messages around the clock places immense pressure on us. It also impedes our ability to disconnect from work, for example, and it can be stressful to feel like you're on the clock 24/7. A November 2019 review and meta-analysis found that high screen usage was associated with a 28 percent increase in the odds of depression. Putting your phone down in a way that's regulated can help to temper this.

3. You're likely to move more

Spending extended periods in front of screens often leads to a more sedentary lifestyle, which can contribute to things like weight gain and musculoskeletal issues—like back or neck pain. A digital detox will prompt you to move more, says Dr. Lipschitz. “You don’t even necessarily need to be going out to exercise specifically,” she says. “Maybe instead of scrolling, you’re working around your house or taking care of chores, perhaps seeing a friend. All of these things don’t involve as much sitting. It’s not often that we’re engaged in social media while moving, and movement is really important for overall health.”

How to Do Your Own Digital Detox

Want to design your own digital detox to kickstart 2024? Here are five expert-backed tips to make life without screens work for you.

1. Start small

Begin by taking small steps to reduce screen time. Abruptly stopping can lead to increased frustration and withdrawal-like symptoms, counteracting the desired outcome. Instead, set achievable goals. Eaynal recommends beginning your detox by avoiding screens for at least 30 minutes to an hour after waking up and an hour before bedtime. Then, move to longer bouts.

2. Find other activities you enjoy

Dr. Lipschitz recommends using the time during your detox to find an alternative positive behavior to engage in. Maybe it’s a book you’re really looking forward to reading or finding a new TV show that you could watch for half an hour each time you’d otherwise lean into social media. The trick? The more useful the swap is, the better. “It’s an opportunity if you choose to make it one.”

3. Take the automatic cues out

For many, going on social media is an automatic behavior. Maybe you always scroll while consuming your morning coffee, after a Zoom call, or on your lunch break. “You need to break the automaticity of that connection,” says Dr. Lipschitz. “The easiest way to do that is actually just delete the app from your phone. That’s the lowest-hanging fruit. The next step would be blocking websites from your computer—but most won’t need to go to that step.”

4. Be honest with yourself

If the detox feels like too much, be honest about the role that technology plays in your life and how leaning into it a little bit less can serve you overall. “Think of choosing to do a digital detox like choosing to do dry January,” says Dr. Lipschitz. “Nobody who has like two glasses of wine a week does dry January because they just aren’t concerned about their alcohol use. It doesn’t have to be that your technology use is at addictive levels. It could simply be that it’s occupying too much space in your life, and it’s not particularly positive.”

5. Get back to your tech—the right way

“Don’t be surprised if you’re more deliberate when you get back to it,” says Eaynal of your renewed tech habits. “Remember: You have the opportunity to be conscious of what content you consume. So do yourself a favor, and focus on inspiring and uplifting material instead of mindless scrolling.”

Candidly, I think about technology and, specifically, social media a lot differently now than I did before this experiment. I take a pause before hitting up social media because I’m bored and ask myself if there’s something more productive I can do with that time. I’ve chosen to disable non-essential notifications, and even that makes a world of difference in how I feel when I reach for my phone. It’s less like, I can’t wait to do my next detox, and more like—I’m so thankful I have these learnings now. The question is: Where should I choose to go offline next?

